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MEMOIR OF HERCULES L. DOUSMAN.

BY GEN. H. H. SIBLEY.

Hercules L. Dousman departed this life at Prairie du Chien, in the State of Wisconsin, on the 12th day of September, 1868. The anouncement of the event, the intelligence which was soon spread far and wide, that death had suddenly stricken a man so long and so favorably known throughout the northwest, was productive of more sad emotions in the entire State of which he was an honored citizen, than are usually manifested in a single community, when it is made known that one of its most prominent members has been unexpectedly called away. Indeed so identified with the territorial and State history of Wisconsin and Minnesota had my lamented friend become, that his name was a familiar word in almost every household, as that of a kind-hearted, high minded man, and public spirited citizen.

Col. Dousman was born in the island of Michilimackinac, or Mackinac, as it is now called, in the year 1800. He was the son of Michael and Catherine Dousman, long and highly esteemed residents of the island, the soil of which now covers their remains. He was sent to Elizabethtown, New Jersey, for high school education, where he remained until he had attained the age of eighteen, when he removed to New York, and engaged himself as clerk to a Mr. Robinson, a dry goods merchant in that city. His services in that capacity continued for two years, and he then returned to the home of his parents at Mackinac. He was soon thereafter employed as clerk by the American Fur Company under the management of John Jacob Astor, Mackinac being the principal western depot of that association. In 1826 he was despatched to Prairie du Chien as the confidential agent of the company, to take charge

of the business at that important entrepot of the fur trade. Here the great natural abilities of Col. DOUSMAN, combined with the thorough commercial education he had received, displayed themselves in the broad and almost limitless sphere to which he had been assigned. The late JOSEPH ROLETTE, Senior, was his ostensible superior, inasmuch as he held the position of partner with the American Fur Company, but in reality the commanding talents of Col. DOUSMAN soon placed him in actual control of the business of the company in this region. In fact the entire country north and west of Prairie du Chien, to the British boundary, (except the Mississippi valley above the Falls of St. Anthony, and the Upper St. Croix and its branches,) with its numerous trading stations and fur traders and other employes, was tributary to that post, until the year 1834, when a new and different organization was effected.

It required a man of sound and cultivated judgment, and of great executive ability, to systematize operations in so extensive a district, embracing many thousands of Indian hunters belonging to distinct and separate tribes, wild and savage in disposition, and even more addicted to inter-tribal war than to the chase. Among these discordant and belligerent bands, were stationed at intervals more or less regular, the fur traders and voyageurs of the great company, entrusted with merchandise amounting in the aggregate to hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. None but those familiar with the ramifications and intricacies of the trade with Indians in early days, can rightly estimate the business tact and energy requisite to bring order out of confusion, and to reduce to a proper working system the operations of traffic in so wide a field. No higher tribute can be paid to the surpassing abilities of Col. DOUSMAN as a business man than the bare mention of the fact that he was successful in his efforts to effect an organization almost perfect in all its parts.

My personal acquaintance with the subject of this memoir dates back to the year 1829, more than forty years ago. I was then a mere boy, employed as a clerk by the American Fur Company at their central agency at Mackinac. Col. DOUSMAN and others in charge of important districts, were required to report in person during the summer of each year at that

point, whither they went in charge of the Mackinac boats that contained the furs and skins collected during the previous year. I became quite intimate with him, although he was by many years my senior, and at each of his annual visits he depicted the beauties of this wild western land in such glowing colors, and the abundance and variety of game animals and birds it contained, that my youthful imagination was captivated and my love of adventure aroused, so that in 1834, at his earnest solicitation, I formed with him and the late Joseph Rolette, Senior, a co-partnership with the American Fur Company of New York, which passed in that year under the direction of Ramsay Crooks as President. By the terms of the agreement, Messrs. Rolette and Dousman were to continue in charge of the station at Prairie du Chien, and conduct the trade with whites and Indians in the region more immediately contiguous to and tributary to that post, while I was to be placed in control of all the country above Lake Pepin, to the head waters of the streams emptying into the Missouri and north to the British line, with my headquarters at St. Peters, now the village of Mendota. Col. Dousman was, therefore, under Providence, chiefly instrumental in linking my destinies with those of Minnesota. I am thankful for the recollection that from our first acquaintance to the day of his death, our warm friendship was mutual and undiminished, and that the harmony existing between us was never, in a single instance, disturbed by any serious controversy.

Our State has sprung into existence so recently that a few of us yet living have participated in or witnessed each step of her progress from pre-territorial times, when a few hundreds of men employed in the fur trade were all the whites to be found in the country, to the present period when Minnesota possesses a population nearly equal to one-sixth of that composing the entire American confederation when it was finally emancipated from foreign control. Less than a generation since, what is now called Minnesota, together with a large part of co-terminous territory, was of importance only as a region producing in abundance wild animals valuable for their furs and skins. The bear, the deer, the fisher, the martin, and the raccoon, were the tenants of the woods; the beaver, the

otter, and other amphibia, such as the mink and the muskrat, were to be found in the streams and lakes, while the prairies were dotted with countless herds of the bison and the elk, accompanied by their usual attendants, wolves and foxes, which scarcely deigned to seek concealment from the eye of the traveler. The numerous lakes and marshes were the breeding places of myriads of wild fowl, including swan, geese and ducks. Many of the younger men who sought employment with the fur companies were, like myself, more attracted to this wild region by a love of adventure and of the chase, than by any prospect of pecuniary gain. There was always enough of danger, also, to give zest to extreme frontier life, and to counteract any tendency to *ennui*. There were the perils of prairie fires and of flood, from evil-disposed savages, and those inseparable from the hunt of ferocious wild beasts, such as the bear, the panther and the buffalo. War was the normal condition of the powerful bands of Dakotas and Chippewas, and the white man falling in with a war party of these belligerent tribes might deem himself fortunate if he could save his life by a sacrifice of whatever property he possessed. The traveler and the hunter in their peregrinations were compelled to trust to their skill in constructing rafts or in swimming, for crossing the numerous streams, and to the compass, or to the sun and stars, to direct their course. Nature in her primitive luxuriance, unmarred by the labor of man, unveiled her beauties on every side, as a reward to those of her infrequent visitors who could appreciate and enjoy them.

Such was the entertainment to which I had been invited by my friend DOUSMAN, and of which he himself had, for several years, been a participant. His robust physique and his bold and manly character were peculiarly adapted to a life of hardship and exposure, and previous to my arrival as his co-partner in business, a due regard to the responsibilities of his position required him to traverse the country at stated intervals, to inspect the posts within his district. Some idea can be formed of the great changes which have occurred since 1834, when I state that when I performed the journey in the autumn of that year from Prairie du Chien to St. Peters, now Mendota, a distance of nearly three hundred miles, there was but one

house between those points, and that was a log cabin occupied by a trader named ROCQUE, situated below Lake Pepin near the site of the present town of Wabasha.

The traders and clerks, who under the direction of Col. DOUSMAN and myself, had charge of the interior trading posts, were men of firmness and integrity, chosen from among the many applicants, for the characteristics which particularly qualified them to deal with a wild and savage race, and to be the custodians of the large outfits of valuable merchandise to be exchanged for furs and peltries. Cases of dishonesty were so rare among them as to constitute special exceptions to the general rule, although opportunities were afforded in a region remote from any of the restraints of law, which would have been taken advantage of by any but men of high moral principle. Of the long roll of these worthies with whom I was brought into close business connection, not a corporal's guard remains. Most of them, with my lamented friend DOUSMAN, have been gathered to their fathers. It is a source of regret that correct and reliable sketches of these veritable pioneers of our State cannot be obtained to be deposited with the collections of this Society. They would add a very important and romantic chapter to the history of Minnesota.

A biography of Col. DOUSMAN commencing with his advent to the Upper Mississippi, would not fall very far short of a history of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Although there was probably no office in the gift of the people of his State, to which he could not have successfully aspired, he made it a rule of his life to accept no public position, from which he departed on one occasion only, when he received the honorary appointment of aid-de-camp to the governor of Wisconsin, with the rank of colonel. Nevertheless, so widely and so favorably was he known, that his advice with reference to the management of Indian affairs in the northwest was eagerly sought by high dignitaries of the general government, and if that advice had been always followed, many grave errors might have been avoided.

During his connection with the American Fur Company of New York, and subsequently as partner with myself in the extensive firm of PIERRE CHOUTEAU and Company of St. Louis,

to whom the interests of the former corporation in this region were transferred in 1843, Col. DOUSMAN was brought into close relations with the Winnebagoes, Menominies, some of the lower bands of Sioux, and a portion of the Chippewas, and his influence, especially over the first named bands was almost without bounds. The Winnebagoes were regarded as among the most turbulent, and dangerous, of the northwestern savages, and nothing but the benign rule under which they were brought by my deceased friend, prevented outbreaks of violence which would necessarily have resulted in great destruction of life and property among the white settlers. His tact, sagacity and consummate knowledge of Indian character, were displayed on many critical occasions, when a collision seemed inevitable, and the services he thus rendered in the cause of peace, were the subject of public recognition by government officers, both civil and military. General ALEXANDER MACOMB, formerly in chief command of the U. S. Army, held him in high estimation, as did General BROOKE, who in after years commanded the Department of the Upper Mississippi with his headquarters at Prairie du Chien, and their policy in the management of the Indian tribes of the northwest was in accordance with that generally recommended by Col. DOUSMAN.

The attempts of the government to negotiate treaties with the Winnebagoes, were often frustrated by the jealous suspicions of their chiefs and head-men, and their great reluctance to sell their lands, and it was almost impossible to succeed in that direction, without first securing the consent and influence of the individual who was the trusted friend and counsellor of these wild bands. They had unbounded faith in the honesty of Col. DOUSMAN, and they looked to him for protection from the rapacity of unprincipled agents, and of the swarm of white cormorants who were ever on the alert to deprive the ignorant savage of the pittance to which they were entitled from the U. S. Government.

Hon. SIMON CAMERON, then, and now, U. S. Senator from Pennsylvania, was a member of a commission many years since, to make payments under treaty stipulations, to the Winnebagoes and their mixed bloods, and having received material assistance from the subject of this memoir, he took

occasion to state subsequently on the floor of the Senate, that in all his long experience, "a more truthful, energetic, fearless man he had never met than HERCULES DOUSMAN, and that his talent, if possible, exceeded his virtues." Seldom indeed, if ever, has it fallen to the lot of a man in private station to wield an influence so extensive, and at the same time so beneficent. The primitive people among whom he so long resided, were accustomed to depend upon him for advice and assistance when trouble overtook them. He acted as peacemaker in their disputes, often-times preventing litigation by his wise counsels, and he was withal ever ready to minister to the wants of the poor and the distressed, without distinction of race.

Although not a politician in the ordinary acceptation of the term, Col. DOUSMAN was in sentiment a conservative democrat, but he was independent enough to condemn whatever he deemed vicious or wrong in the acts of his own party, and with equal candor he never withheld his tribute of praise from political opponents when in his judgment the line of policy pursued by them was in accordance with the public welfare. So prominent was this trait in his character, and so convinced were the people at large of his unswerving integrity, that if he had assented to the solicitations of his friends to become a candidate for high public position, he would unquestionably have received the votes of very many who differed from him in politics.

When the war of the great rebellion burst upon the country, the personal influence, and the purse of Col. DOUSMAN were cast into the scale in support of the Lincoln administration, and few private citizens accomplished more than himself in arousing the people of his section to the imminency of the peril, and in equipping regiments for the field. He frequently expressed to me his earnest conviction, that it was the duty of every man in the community to devote his means and his energies to maintain intact the integrity of the Federal Union.

Col. DOUSMAN was a firm friend of our own Territory and State. Intimately acquainted as he was with the topography of the country, and its vast capacity for production, he advocated its claims to consideration, and predicted the brilliant future of Minnesota with all the enthusiasm of an old settler.

Next to his own State, to which he was ever loyal, his affections were bestowed upon the younger sister of Wisconsin, and his memory merits a warm place in the hearts of the people of Minnesota for the anxiety he manifested, and the efforts he made, to advance their material interests.

Northwestern Wisconsin has also good cause to cherish him in grateful remembrance. For many years an owner of steamers on the Upper Mississippi, he accomplished much in directing immigration and business to her ports, and but for his unremitting exertions, and the liberal outlay from his own resources in aid of the enterprise, the railway from Milwaukee to Prairie du Chien, that great thoroughfare of travel and transportation, would long have remained unconstructed.

The strict business habits of the deceased, and the many opportunities afforded in a new and rapidly growing region for judicious investments, enabled him to amass an ample fortune. While he was always liberal in his contributions to religious and charitable objects, and noted for his hospitality, Col. Dousman was by no means given to extravagance, nor did he encourage it in those within the sphere of his influence. Many men are yet living who are indebted for their prosperity to the pecuniary aid and wise direction they received from him in time of need.

In 1844, Col. Dousman was united in marriage to the widow of his former partner in business, Joseph Rolette, Senior, who died some years previously. The issue of the union, which was a most happy one, was a son who bears the name and is possessed of many of the characteristics of his father. The estimable widow resides with her son, in a new and splendid residence erected upon the site of the old homestead at Prairie du Chien.

I am well aware that I have very imperfectly discharged the duty devolved upon me by the Society, of preparing a suitable memoir of my cherished friend. I might have entered into much greater detail, but in so doing I would have been compelled to transcend the limits allotted ordinarily to an obituary of any man, however distinguished. On the other hand, I could not have said less, without doing violence to my own feelings. I cannot but recall to mind, with the keenest regret,

that the friend of my early and riper years—my associate in business for nearly a quarter of a century—who directed my steps for the first time to what is now Minnesota, and to whom I was fervently attached, has gone the way of all the earth. He was summoned away suddenly, when his bodily vigor seemed hardly to have been diminished, or his intellectual energies to have lost any portion of their force. He left behind him no enemies to exult over his departure, but very many warm friends and dear relatives to lament the death of one whose place can never be filled in their affections. All that was mortal of the imposing form and presence of the deceased, now lies mouldering in the cemetery he himself had donated to the Catholic church at Prairie du Chien, and the magnificent marble monument erected by loving hands to commemorate his virtues will have become dim and tarnished by time, long ere his noble example shall cease to exercise an influence upon the community and the State of which he was an honored member.

"Why weep ye, then, for him, who having run
The bound of man's appointed years, at last,
Life's blessings all enjoyed, life's labors done,
Serenely to his final rest has passed:
While the soft memory of his virtues yet
Lingers, like twilight hues when the bright sun has set."

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